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ABSTRACT

A functional approach to language teaching begins with knowing how students intend to use the foreign language for specific purposes and in specific situations. Instructors of medical Spanish can begin by determining the specific language functions that their students must be able to express when communicating with Hispanic patients, by means of a survey taken during the first class meeting. Such a questionnaire would request information about: the students (including their language background, travel, career plans, medical specialization, reasons for enrolling in the course, and most needed Spanish communication skills) and most-needed language categories, such as socialization, maintaining close relationships, influencing people's actions, making judgments, and action in specific medical situations. Survey results determine the appropriate classroom language exercises and activities. Materials can focus on a unifying theme such as serving patients in emergency situations, physical examinations, pre- and post-natal care, and nutritional counseling. The language practice provided should be both realistic and enjoyable, and specific techniques can be incorporated. These include teaching the vocabulary and structures specified most on the questionnaire, teaching the expression of past actions, using Total Physical Response, using students-centered input, using pictures creatively, and using paired interviews. (MSE)

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MEDICAL SPANISH: A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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MEDICAL SPANISH: A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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Teaching for Functional Proficiency

When one teaches a foreign language for functional proficiency, communicating information becomes vastly more important than using grammatical structures accurately. Anyone who has listened to a five-year child tell a story in halting Spanish or has read a foreigner's letter written in imperfect English can understand the logic of that statement. What people say or write usually carries more weight, in communicative terms, than how well they express themselves.

A functional approach to language teaching begins with knowing how students intend to use the foreign language for specific purposes and in specific situations. For example, most students of Medical Spanish need to greet and meet Hispanic patients. They may also need to obtain medical histories, to inform patients of the results of lab tests or the outcome of an operation, and to reassure recuperating patients as well as their family and friends. Once an instructor knows what students need to communicate, he or she can begin to sequence appropriate grammatical structures and lexical items to fulfull those communicative needs.

Determining Language Functions

Instructors can take the initial step to teaching Medical Spanish functionally by determining the specific language functions that their students must be able to express when communicating with Hispanic patients. The best way to assess students' communicative needs is to prepare and administer a questionnaire which students can complete during their first class meeting. Here are four steps for developing, administering, and analyzing a two-part questionnaire for this purpose.

I. In Part I of the questionnaire, find out some general information about your students. For example, inquire about their former language experience, if any. Ask them about previous and intended travel to Hispanic countries, their medical specialization, career plans, and their reason for enrolling in Medical Spanish. Also, determine which communication skills they deem necessary or useful when working with Hispanics: understanding spoken Spanish, speaking, reading, and writing Spanish. In addition, find out the situations in which your students will

most likely use the language. And determine how significant to them is understanding the daily Hispanic culture such as common gestures and body language, fears and supersititions, attitudes toward medical personnel, machismo, and curanderismo.

II. In Part II of the questionnaire, develop a set of language categories related to health care. These categories may include, for example, Socializing, Maintaining Closer Relationships, Influencing People's Actions, and Making Judgments. One may also wish to list language functions for specific medical situations such as giving a medical examination. List three to five language functions associated with each category, and write a sample sentence to illustrate each language function. Here are some examples:

Socializing

_____ Meeting and greeting people: "Hello! I'm ..." / "Good morning, José. How are you feeling today?"

_____ Beginning and ending conversations: "Well, I've got to go now. See you tomorrow."

_____ Sharing likes and dislikes: "I like sports a lot, but I don't like boxing."

Maintaining Closer Relationships

_____ Making commitments: "Your physician will be Dr. Roberts, and I'll be your nurse."

_____ Expressing satisfaction and appreciation: "Thanks a lot, Ana. You're such a cooperative patient."

_____ Reassuring others: "Everything's going to be all right, Carlitos. Don't worry. Your family is here with you."

Influencing People's Actions

_____ Expressing wants and preferences: "I need you to fill out this form, sir."

_____ Giving advice, orders, and making suggestions: "You should eat less sweets, Esteban." / "Take a deep breath through your mouth. Now exhale slowly." / "I suggest you come in to see me next month."

_____ Requesting and giving permission: "You may get dressed now, Marta."

Making judgments

_____ Expressing approval and disapproval: "It's okay to eat popcorn, but not chocolate bars."

_____ Expressing opinions and feelings: "You have to stop smoking. It could harm your unborn baby."

_____ Responding to criticism: "I know you've been waiting a while, ma'am, but we operate here on a first-come, first-served basis."

Specific Medical Situations

_____Taking a medical history

_____Giving a medical examination

_____Making appointments with patients

III. Distribute the questionnaire. Ask students to rank the importance of learning how to express the language functions in Spanish within each category. For example, in the sample questionnaire above, students could rank the most important language function as number 1, a less important one as number 2, and the least important of the three as number 3.

IV. Calculate the mean for each language function on the completed questionnaires. The lower the mean of a language function, the more important that function should be taught. The results of this simple research can determine what communicative needs should be included in a student-centered, functionally-based course syllabus.

Some tips and techniques

Once you have determined the desired communicative needs of your students, you can begin preparing and selecting appropriate language exercises and activities to use in your course. These instructional materials can focus on a unifying theme such as serving patients in emergency situations, during physical examinations, when providing pregnancy and postnatal care, and when giving advice on nutrition. The materials should provide students practice in using Spanish in ways that are both realistic and enjoyable. What follows is a series of tips and techniques for teaching students of Medical Spanish. The bibliography at the end of this paper lists additional sources of effective methods for developing functional proficiency.

1. Teach the formulaic expressions, lexical items, grammatical structures, paralinguistics, and cultural information necessary for expressing the language functions that your students ranked highly on their questionnaires. Beginning students should learn formulaic expressions simply as lexical items, rather than analyzing their morphological and syntactic features. For example:

> **¿Cómo se siente usted?** (How do you feel?)
> **Todo está bien ahora.** (Everything's okay now.)
> **No se preocupe, señora.** (Don't worry, ma'am.)

2. Teach **me gustaría** + verb infinitive to express what people would like.

> **Me gustaría sacar** unas radiografías ahora. (I would like to take some X-rays now.)
> **Me gustaría hablar** con usted en mi oficina. (I would like to speak with you in my office.)

3. Teach **favor de (no)** + verb infinitive as an easy way of giving advice to patients:

> **Favor de quitarse** la camisa. (Please take off your shirt.)
> **Favor de cerrar** los ojos. (Please close your eyes.)
> **Favor de no moverse.** (Please don't move.)

4. Beginning students need to learn to express past actions. Unfortunately, authors of beginning-level textbooks of Spanish seldom introduce past tense forms in the initial chapters. Also, most of these texts start with the present tense forms of regular -ar verbs, then proceed to present tense -er and -ir verbs, followed by stem-changing and irregular verbs. Instructors who use a functional approach, however, could teach **acabar de** + verb infinitive, and they could introduce the **yo** and **usted** forms of common Spanish verbs so that students could exchange information about past actions and events. Some examples:

> Cecilia **acaba de dar a luz** a su bebé. ¡Es un niño! (Cecilia has just given birth to her baby. It's a boy!)
>
> **Acabo de hablar** con el esposo de Cecilia. (I've just talked to Cecilia's husband.)

¿Cuándo tomó Ud. la medicina, señor? (When did you take the medicine, sir?)

Hablé con su médico anoche. (I talked with your doctor last night.)

5. Use Total Physical Response (TPR) activities. Put simply, the instructor gives commands that students act out. Students may also give commands to each other and to their instructor. TPR is an excellent approach to developing listening comprehension skills. It is particularly useful for teaching and practicing action verbs and parts of the body. Examples: **Siéntese, por favor. Abra la boca. Saque la lengua. Diga "ah." Cierre la boca.** (Sit down, please. Open your mouth. Stick out your tongue. Say "ah." Close your mouth.)

6. Use student-centered input with names as responses. This technique is especially useful for teaching vocabulary. Students indicate comprehension by answering with their classmates' names. For example, the instructor says: **Algunos estudiantes aquí tienen pelo rubio. ¿Quiénes son?** (There are some students here who have blond hair. Who are they?) The students point to any blond student in class and says his or her name. The instructor can combine their answers by saying, for example: **Sí, Judy, Paul y Diane tienen pelo rubio.** (Yes, Judy, Paul, and Diane have blond hair.)

7. Use pictures creatively. Select magazine photographs that tell a story. The pictures should relate to a particular theme relevant to your students' communicative needs. Describe the photographs aloud to students in Spanish. Add interesting and humorous anecdotes about the people, places, and things in the pictures to motivate students and to facilitate their listening comprehension. Then determine how well students understood the story by asking yes-no, either-or, and informational questions such as: **¿Es médica Ana? ¿Trabaja Ana en una clínica o en un hospital? ¿Quién es ese señor en la sala de espera y qué quiere? ¿Por qué está esperando José con su mamá?** (Is Ana a doctor? Does Ana work in a clinic or in a hospital? Who is that man in the waiting room and what does he want?) Another technique is to encourage students to speak or write Spanish by having them complete sentences that correspond to the pictures. For example: **En esta foto Ana...** (In this photo, Ana...) Intermediate students could retell the story in their own words. They could also invent their own stories, using the pictures as cues.

8. Use paired interviews. Give students a list of integrated questions dealing with a specific topic related to health care. Then they work in pairs, asking each other the questions. Be sure that only one partner in each pair reads from the list of questions; the other partner should listen and answer, but not necessarily in complete sentences. Here are several sample questions that relate to a giving a medical examination: **¿Cuánto tiempo hace que sufre Ud. dolor en la mano izquierda? Dígame, ¿qué le pasó? Voy a darle una receta. ¿Es usted alérgico(a) a cualquier medicina?** (How long have you had pain in your left hand? Tell me, what happened to you? I'm going to give you a prescription. Are you allergic to any medicine?)

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MEDICAL SPANISH

A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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A **functional approach** to language teaching is based on one's <u>needs</u> for using a foreign language in specific situations.

Question: What specific tasks should students of Medical Spanish be able to accomplish when serving Hispanic patients?

Answer: Find out by surveying students' communicative needs for using Spanish.

CREATE A QUESTIONNAIRE

Part I: General information about the student

1. Previous language experience
2. Previous and intended travel to Hispanic countries
3. Current profession and career plans
4. Reason for taking this course
5. Most necessary communication skills:

   _____understanding spoken Spanish

   _____ speaking Spanish

   _____ reading Spanish

   _____ writing Spanish

   _____ understanding Hispanic customs

Part II: List language functions and subcategories related to providing health care. Write a sample sentence to illustrate each language function. Here are some examples:

I. Socializing

_____ Meeting and greeting people: "Hello! I'm....." / "Good morning, José. How are you feeling today?"

_____ Beginning and ending conversations: "Well, I've got to go now. See you tomorrow."

_____ Sharing likes and dislikes: "I like sports a lot, but I don't like football."

II. Maintaining Closer Relationships

_____ Making commitments: "Your physician will be Dr. Roberts, and I'll be your nurse."

_____ Expressing satisfaction and appreciation: "Thank you so much, Ana. You're such a cooperative patient."

_____ Reassuring others: "Everything's going to be all right, Carlitos. Don't worry. Your family is here with you."

III. Influencing People's Actions

_____ Expressing wants and preferences: "I need you to fill out this form, sir."

_____ Giving advice, orders, and making suggestions: "You should eat less sweets." / "Take a deep breath through your mouth. Now exhale slowly." / "I suggest you come in to see me next month."

_____ Requesting and giving permission: "You may get dressed now, Marta."

IV. Making Judgments

_____ Expressing approval and disapproval: "It's okay to eat the popcorn, but not the chocolate bar."

_____ Expressing opinions and feelings: "You must stop smoking. It could be harmful to your unborn baby."

_____ Responding to criticism: "I know you've been waiting a while, ma'am, but we operate here on a first-come, first-served basis."

V. Specific Medical Situations

_____ Taking a medical history

_____ Giving a medical examination

_____ Making appointments with patients

DISTRIBUTE THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Ask students to rank the importance of learning how to express the language functions by using numbers 1-3. Number 1 represents the most important language function, number 2 is a less important one, and number 3 is the least important of the three.

TALLY THE RESULTS

Tally the numbers and calculate the mean for each language function. The results of this simple research will show what communicative needs are most and least important to your students.

DEVELOP COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

Select and develop language exercises and activities that help your students communicate with their Hispanic patients. Use the results of your research to guide you. These instructional materials can have an unifying theme such as serving patients in emergency situations, during physical examinations, when providing pregnancy and postnatal care, dental care, and when giving advice on nutrition. The materials should provide practice in using Spanish in ways that are realistic and enjoyable.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

1. Teach formulaic expressions, lexical items, grammatical structures, paralinguistics, and cultural information necessary for expressing the language functions that your students ranked highly on their questionnaires.

a. Teach beginning students formulaic expressions which they should learn to use as lexical items.

¿Como se siente usted?

Todo está bien ahora.

No se preocupe, señora.

b. Teach **me gustaría** + verb infinitive to express what people would like.

Me gustaría sacar unas radiografías ahora.

c. Teach **favor de (no)** + verb infinitive for giving advice to patients.

Favor de quitarse la camisa.

Favor de cerrar los ojos.

Favor de no moverse.

2. Beginning students need to learn express past actions. Instructors could teach **acabar de** + verb infinitive, and they could introduce the yo and usted forms of common Spanish verbs.

Cecilia **acaba de dar** la luz a su bebé. ¡Es un niño!
Acabo de hablar con el esposo de Cecilia.

¿Cuándo **tomó** Ud. la medicina, señora?
Hablé con su médico anoche.

3. **Total Physical Response (TPR) activities.** Put simply, the instructor gives commands that students act out. Students may also give commands to each other and to their instructor. TPR is an excellent approach to developing listening comprehension skills. It is particularly useful for teaching and practicing action verbs and parts of the body. Examples: **Siéntese, por favor. Abra la boca. Diga "ah." Otra vez. Cierre la boca.**

4. **Student-centered input with names as responses.** Students indicate comprehension by answering with their classmates' names. For example, the instructor says: **Hay algunos estudiantes aquí que tienen pelo rubio. ¿Quiénes son?** The students point to any blond student in class and says his or her name. The instructor can combine the answers by saying, for example, **Sí, Judy, Paul y Diane tienen pelo rubio.** This technique is especially useful for teaching vocabulary.

5. **Using pictures.** Select magazine photographs that tell a story. The pictures should relate to a particular theme relevant to your students' communicative needs. Describe the photographs aloud to students in Spanish. Add interesting and humorous anecdotes about the people, places, and things in the pictures to motivate students and to facilitate their listening comprehension. Then determine how well students understood the story by asking yes-no, either-or, and informational questions such as: **¿Es médica Ana? ¿Trabaja Ana en una clínica o en un hospital? ¿Quién es el niño que está esperando con su mamá en la clínica? ¿Por qué está esperando José con su mamá?** Another technique is to encourage students to speak or write Spanish by having them complete sentences that correspond to the pictures. Example: **En esta foto Ana...** Intermediate students could retell the story in their own words. They could also invent their own stories, using the pictures as cues.

6. **Paired interviews.** Give students a list of integrated questions on a specific topic related to their work as providers of health care. Students work in pairs, asking each other the questions. Be sure that only one partner in each pair reads from the list of questions; the other partner should listen and answer, not necessarily in complete sentences. Some sample questions relating to a medical examination: **¿Cuánto tiempo hace que sufre Ud. dolor en la mano izquierda? Dígame, ¿qué le pasó? Voy a darle medicina para la mano. ¿Tiene usted alergias a cualquier medicina?**

7. There are hundreds of other language learning activities available for encouraging students to use Spanish communicatively. Please refer to the books and articles in the bibliography. Most of these activities can be adapted for students of Medical Spanish.

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